



December 27, 2020

Melville United Church

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Melville United Church
December 27, 2020
1st Sunday of Christmas

Presiding today - Rev. Marion Loree

We acknowledge with respect the history, spirituality and culture of the Indigenous peoples with whom Treaty 4 - also known as the Haldimand Tract - was signed and the territory wherein our church resides, and we acknowledge our responsibilities as treaty members.

Welcome

My name is Marion Loree and I am the minister here at Melville United Church in Fergus, Ontario. We gather in community today - December 27, 2020 - because our area has been moved in to a Red Zone category of Covid-19 restrictions there are no worshippers here in person. On-line services will be our norm for the foreseeable future and those who don't have electronic access have a printed version.

Today is the First Sunday of Christmas. December can be such a busy month with its focus on Christmas Eve and Day and in church we have focused on Advent and preparing to meet Jesus in the stable. All of that means we may not have had very much time to enjoy singing the beloved Christmas carols that are such an integral part of the Christian story.

Behind many of our favourite carols there are stories of great faith and witness, which when shared can help connect our celebrations with the gospel message. So today we will do a little singing and I will share a few stories about the carols. I hope this will bring some joy to your heart. This service is based on one published on the United Church of Canada web-site and written by Andy O'Neil. I invite you to have the words to the carols handy so you can join in singing along.

Announcements:

Sharing the Light: Sharing the Light *(If you are watching this on-line or reading it from a page I invite you to take a moment to light a candle, centre yourself and prepare to enter in to a time of worship and prayer. As you light your candle repeat the following words)*

We light a candle today to remind us
that there is a mysterious power or presence that connects us all -
we call it God.
that this mysterious presence dwells within each of us -
as it did in the person of Jesus whom we call the Christ.
that we *cannot* be separated from this presence that is
the Spirit of love which created us and that is part of us always.

Call to Worship:

We come singing with the angels of heaven
and the creatures of the earth.
We come singing with the sun and moon
and shining stars.

We come singing with the rushing waters
and the fish in the sea.
We come singing with the fire and hail,
the snow and frost.
We come singing with animals and cattle
and creeping things and flying birds.
We come celebrating Emmanuel - God with us.
Come, people of God, let us worship together
in song and story.

Hymn: Joy to the World

VU 59 (vs 1,2,4)

Joy to the world! the Lord is come:
let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the earth! the Saviour reigns:
let all their songs employ,
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

He rules the earth with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love, and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.

Opening Prayer:

Great Mystery, we come still celebrating the events of Christmas. We may be a little more relaxed, we may be a bit tired, but we still come seeking connection to our faith community and to you. We come to learn and be renewed on our journey. May we find inspiration in the stories to be shared as we move toward a new and, hopefully, better year ahead. May we feel your presence among us even though we cannot be together in person.

Remind us to see the spark of holiness that dwells within every human heart. Remind us to share the light of your love with all whom we touch. Remind us to let go of our fears and open our hearts, hands and minds to the wonders that are possible with you. Amen.

Words of Assurance:

The gift of God's wondrous love is available to all. Through this gift we come to know the forgiveness, joy, and peace that transcends all our struggles.
Open your heart and receive it!
Thanks be to God!

Ministry of Music: Make Room - Matt Maher - sung by Spirit Sings Praise Band

Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10 (The New Revised Standard Version)

(The road of holiness)

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory and the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God, who will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. God will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of God shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Story: O Little Town of Bethlehem

Phillips Brooks, the composer of this famous Christmas carol, was the minister of Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia and had visited Bethlehem in December of 1865. Phillips Brooks traveled to the Holy Land. The itinerary included a horseback ride from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. Back then it truly was a small village, far removed from the bustling city it would later become. By nightfall he was in the field where, according to tradition, the shepherds heard the angelic announcement. Then he attended the Christmas Eve service at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Something about the beauty and simplicity of that visit stayed with Phillips Brooks when he returned to America. Several years later, when he wanted a new song of Christmas for the children to sing at his church, he reached back in memory for inspiration from his Holy Land visit. The poem he wrote painted in words the sights and sounds of that little town of Bethlehem he had visited. Writing to the children of his congregation, he recalled that first visit: "I remember especially on Christmas Eve, when I was standing in the old church in Bethlehem, close to the spot where Jesus was born, when the whole church was ringing hour after hour with the splendid hymns of praise to God, how again and again it seemed as if I could hear voices I knew well, telling each other of the "wonderful night" of the Savior's birth."

What came from his pen was a Christmas carol that has lived to become a worldwide favorite.

Unlike many Christmas carols, the lyrics of this reflective and hopeful song are set in the present tense rather than the past. The author's experience of wonder and awe are palpable and cover the seemingly great distance between the birth of Christ then and our experience of it now.

A number of tunes have been composed for these words. The most familiar is the one we use called ST LOUIS, though FOREST GREEN is equally beautiful (and set slightly lower, making it easier to sing).

Alternate Tune FOREST GREEN.

VU 518

Carol: O Little Town of Bethlehem

VU 64 (vs 1,2,4)

O little town of Bethlehem,
 how still we see thee lie!
 Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
 the silent stars go by;
 yet in thy dark streets shineth
 the everlasting light;
 the hopes and fears of all the years
 are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary;
 and gathered all above,
 while mortals sleep, the angels keep
 their watch of wondering love.
 O morning stars, together
 proclaim the holy birth,
 and praises sing to God the King,
 and peace to all on earth.

O holy child of Bethlehem,
 descend to us, we pray;
 cast out our sin, and enter in;
 be born in us today.
 We hear the Christmas angels
 the great glad tidings tell;
 O come to us, abide with us,
 our Lord Emmanuel.

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of God. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the

wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

Story: Good King Wenceslas

The words of this next carol were written in 1853 by John Mason Neale although the melody is much older, originating in the 13th century. "Good King Wenceslas" is about a man who braves winter storms during Saint Stephen's Day to help his poorer neighbours.

The story it tells is based on a real person - Wenceslaus I, Duke of Bohemia. He was also known as Vaclac the Good and lived from c. 907 to September 28, 935. And the reason we have his exact date of death is that he was assassinated - on the orders of his brother, appropriately named Boleslaus the Cruel.

Wenceslaus had been adored by his subjects and his charity and popularity eventually led to his being named the patron saint of the Czech Republic. His remains are in St Vitus' Cathedral in Prague and his Saint's Day (September 28, the day of his death) is a public holiday in the Czech Republic.

The carol was written for the Feast of St. Stephen, better known as Boxing Day, (December 26). And it celebrates the long tradition of charitable giving on the Second Day of Christmas.

It has become one of the best loved carols ever written - and was even performed by The Beatles. One reason it is so beloved is because of the evocative story images and the possibility of performance. Traditionally, the part of the Page (the king's assistant) is sung by a treble voice, while the King is sung by a bass voice. However, in a congregational setting, the same could be achieved by assigning a part to higher and lower voices, or children and adults, or one half of the church and the other, with everyone joining together for the non-dialogue parts. Singing this simple Christmas hymn can be quite a bit of fun.

Carol: Good King Wenceslas

Good King Wenceslas looked out
 On the Feast of Stephen
 When the snow lay round about
 Deep and crisp and even
 Brightly shone the moon that night
 Though the frost was cruel
 When a poor man came in sight
 Gathering winter fuel.

Hither, page, and stand by me,
 If thou knowst it, telling
 Yonder peasant, who is he?

Where and what his dwelling?
 Sire, he lives a good league hence,
 Underneath the mountain
 Right against the forest fence
 By Saint Agnes fountain.

Bring me flesh and bring me wine
 Bring me pine logs hither
 Thou and I shall see him dine
 When we bear them hither.
 Page and monarch, forth they went
 Forth they went together
 Through the rude winds wild lament
 And the bitter weather

Sire, the night is darker now
 And the wind blows stronger
 Fails my heart, I know not how
 I can go no longer.
 Mark my footsteps, good my page
 Tread thou in them boldly
 Thou shall find the winters rage
 Freeze thy blood less coldly.

In his masters steps he trod
 Where the snow lay dinted
 Heat was in the very sod
 Which the Saint had printed
 Therefore, Christian men, be sure
 Wealth or rank possessing
 Ye, who now will bless the poor
 Shall yourselves find blessing.

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Story: It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

Written by Massachusetts Unitarian minister Edmund Sears, this next pastoral-sounding carol carries a much deeper meaning than simply retelling the birth of Jesus. Sears hoped to offer an uplifting message amid the great poverty he was witness to and to remind people that God, in the form of a child, had entered a world sorely in need of love and peace.

He wrote his carol, The Angel's Song –It Came Upon the Midnight Clear, while recovering from a devastating illness and from the depths of profound despair. In 1849, when Reverend Sears wrote his carol, the United States still reeled from the aftermath of the Mexican War and the burning issue of slavery that in another decade would ignite the Civil War. Europe reverberated with revolutions, and people all over the world warred with themselves and each other. No one seemed to be listening to angel's songs of peace.

It's unlikely that Reverend Sears thought of his song as a carol or that his contemporaries considered it to be a carol – at least not at first. When Reverend Sears wrote The Angel's Song in 1849, carols were just beginning a nineteenth century revival as famous composers began to write new and contemporary versions of their ancient forms and It Came Upon The Midnight Clear was one of the first of these new carols.

In this carol, Reverend Sears describes an angel chorus singing God's message of peace on the earth, good will to men, but their songs fall on heedless humanity so immersed in wars and strife that they can't hear the angel songs or God's message of peace. Reverend Sears is tellingly contemporary. Besides his two carols, he wrote between 40 and 50 hymns.

A very fine movie made in 1992, A Midnight Clear, tells the story of American and German soldiers laying aside their weapons on Christmas Eve of 1944. The story ends tragically, as miscommunication causes hostilities to resume. Yet, the powerful third verse of the carol, with its invitation to hush the noise of battle in order to hear God's "love song" to the earth and all people, is a strong one. This carol speaks gently, yet powerfully, God's word of peace amid strife and weariness.

Richard Storrs Willis' tune, CAROL, paired with the words only a year after Sears wrote it, gave the carol its lasting appeal and one of its two most common tunes, the other being NOEL.

Alternate tune - NOELVU 185

Carol It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

VU 44 (vs 1,2,3)

It came upon the midnight clear,
 that glorious song of old,
 from angels bending near the earth
 to touch their harps of gold,
 'Peace on the earth, good will to all,
 from heaven's all-gracious King!'
 The world in solemn stillness lay
 to hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come

with peaceful wings unfurled;
 and still their heavenly music floats
 o'er all the weary world;
 above its sad and lowly plains
 they bend on hovering wing,
 and ever o'er its Babel sounds
 the blessed angels sing.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
 the world has suffered long;
 beneath the angel strain have rolled
 two thousand years of wrong;
 and warring humankind hears not
 the love song which they bring.
 O hush the noise, and cease your strife,
 to hear the angels sing.

Scripture: Isaiah 63:7-9

I will tell you of God's unfailing love, and sing the praises of YHWH for all that God did for us - the many good things done for the house of Israel, which God did with motherly compassion and many kindnesses. For YHWH said, "Truly these are my people, children who will not be false to me" - and so God became their Liberator. In all their distress, O God, you were distressed, and the angel of your Presence saved them; you redeemed them out of deep love and profound mercy; you lifted them up and carried them from time immemorial.

Story:

In 1816, Father Joseph Mohr wrote the poem "Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!" while stationed at a pilgrim church in Mariapfarr, Austria. Two years later, now at St. Nicholas' church in Oberndorf, he asked his choir director, Franz Gruber, to set the poem for guitar and choir.

The congregation at the Midnight Mass in 1818 listened as the voices of the Father Mohr and Franz Gruber rang through the church to the accompaniment of Father Mohr's guitar. On each of the six verses the choir repeated the last two lines in four-part harmony. On that Christmas Eve, a song was born that would wing its way into the hearts of people throughout the world. Now translated into hundreds of languages, it is sung by untold millions every December from the smallest chapels to the greatest cathedrals the world over.

Since then, some fanciful tales have grown around this simple collaboration. Some tell of mice eating the bellows of the organ creating the necessity for a hymn to be accompanied by a guitar. Others claim that Joseph Mohr was forced to write the words to a new carol in haste since the organ would not play. A recent film, created for Austrian television places Oberndorf in the Alps and includes evil railroad barons and a double-dealing priest, while a recent book by a German author places a zither in the hands of Franz Gruber and connects Joseph Mohr with a tragic fire engulfing the city of Salzburg.

You can read claims that "Silent Night" was sung on Christmas Eve in 1818 and then forgotten by its creators but this is easily discounted by manuscript arrangements of the carol by both Mohr and Gruber which were produced at various times between 1820 and 1855. In this age of tabloid journalism, it's not surprising that some feel it necessary to invent frivolous anecdotes and create fables for a story that is quite beautiful in its simplicity.

Though meant for a performance in a church Silent Night was composed for guitar which was rather unusual for those days. Father Joseph Mohr's guitar can still be seen at Hallein's Franz Gruber Museum.

For our purposes we will have the piano accompany us and we will sing only three verses in English.

Carol: Silent Night, Holy Night VU 67

Silent night! Holy night!
All is calm, all is bright
round yon virgin mother and child.
Holy infant so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night! Holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight:
glories stream from heaven afar,
heavenly hosts sing Hallelujah,
Christ the Saviour is born, Christ the Saviour is born.

Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
radiant beams from thy holy face,
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth, Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

Preparation for Prayer:

As we prepare our hearts and minds to enter into a time of prayer I invite you to sit comfortably and quietly for a moment. Breathe deeply a few times paying particular attention to your breath as it moves in through your nostrils and fills your lungs. Picture your breath as a light entering your body and filling it with love and relaxation. Then when you exhale imagine the breath taking all your tensions and worries with it as it leaves your body. Do this a few times until you feel relaxed then move on into the prayer time.

Prayers:

Great Mystery, Father and Mother of us all, you draw us together in so many ways and sharing stories is one way we connect with each other. Which is one of the things that made Christmas so difficult for many of us this year. We are social beings and we thrive when we can be in close proximity to others but because of the need to protect the most vulnerable among us from the Covid-19 virus we remain apart.

But we still have much to be thankful for. We give thanks for technology and the opportunity to connect with family and loved ones electronically. We give thanks for your unending love as shown in the life of the one whose birth we celebrated two days ago - Jesus the Christ.

We give thanks for this season which offers hope for the vision of justice you promise, even in the midst of despair; for peace within and among your people, even in the midst of conflict; joy found in reunion and celebration, even amid the challenges of this life; and love, with the power to transform and heal all things, even in the midst of brokenness.

We pray today for those who still long for these, your gifts, God of Love: for those who are alone or anxious; for those who grieve; for those who are ill in body, mind or spirit; for those who endure the terror of conflict and oppression; for those who are hungry or homeless; for all your people and for your world, we pray, O God.

Let us listen to the angels' song again, your song of love for this world. Move us to return that song in what we say and do, that we may be instruments of your hope, peace, joy and love.

We pray today for our brothers and sisters of Tobermory United Church and for all those who work on our behalf in other parts of our country and the world. And we pray for ourselves as, in a moment of silence, we offer the prayers of our hearts... (silence)...

Your love comes to us in the darkness of the night in the gentle and innocent form of a baby. May we welcome and accept this greatest gift of all.

We offer these and all of our prayers in the name of the one whose birth we celebrate, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together saying...

Lord's Prayer:

Our Father who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy name,
 thy kingdom come,
 thy will be done,
 on earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,
 And forgive us our trespasses,
 as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil:

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory
 forever and ever. Amen.

Offering:

If you would like to do your part by making a monetary donation to Melville United church there are a number of ways to do that.

1. *Cheque (post-dated cheques are welcome): made payable to: Melville United Church - which can be mailed to the church at P.O. Box 41, Fergus, ON N1M 2W7 or put in the mail slot beside the parking lot door.*
2. *Donate online through the Canada Helps website
<https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/melville-united-church/>*
3. *Call Lynda, to arrange Pre-Authorized Remittance payments (PAR).*
4. *E-transfer directly from your bank. E-mail to secretary@melvilleunited.com*

Offering Prayer:

Receive these gifts, Great Provider, for your work in this world. May our words become actions and our actions reflect your love. Amen.

Hymn: Go, Tell It on the Mountain

VU 43

Go, tell it on the mountain,
over the hills and everywhere.
Go, tell it on the mountain
that Jesus Christ is born.

- 1 While shepherds kept their watching
o'er silent flocks by night,
behold, throughout the heavens
there shone a holy light.

Go, tell it on the mountain,
over the hills and everywhere.
Go, tell it on the mountain
that Jesus Christ is born.

- 2 The shepherds feared and trembled
when lo, above the earth
rang out the angel chorus
that hailed our Saviour's birth!

Go, tell it on the mountain,
over the hills and everywhere.
Go, tell it on the mountain
that Jesus Christ is born.

- 3 Down in a lonely manger
the humble Christ was born,
and God sent our salvation
that blessed Christmas morn.

Go, tell it on the mountain,
over the hills and everywhere.
Go, tell it on the mountain
that Jesus Christ is born.

Blessing/Sending Forth:

May the comfort promised by Isaiah go with you
as you leave this time and place.

May the tenderness of God speak to your heart.

May the challenge of Christ give purpose to your rest and your work.

And may the renewal of the Spirit call you into tomorrow.

Go in Peace.

Postlude:**Prayer of the Week:**

Holy Oneness, as we head into a new year on our calendars, fill us with strength and courage. Let us be optimistic and patient as the next weeks and months unfold. Grant us the peace and clarity of mind to think, act, and love with justice and compassion. May we remember that you are with us - always. Amen.